

Structures of constraint and women's paid work in Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of different structures of constraint in restricting women's access to paid work in Pakistan. Using data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and Pakistan Demographic Health Surveys, it offers a descriptive analysis of men and women's labor market outcomes in Pakistan, evincing gender inequalities. Although female labor force participation rates in Pakistan have risen over 1990-2018, much of this increase might have come from informal employment in rural areas, within the category of self-employment and family work. Female employment is largely segregated to the agricultural sector (66%), followed by the manufacturing sector (16%). From 2013 to 2018, employment in the manufacturing sector grew faster for women than for men. However, much of this increase came from a sharp growth in the female share in the category of self-employment and contributing family work (by 39 percentage points); men's share in that category declined slightly (by 3 percentage points). Female shares in wage and salaried employment declined both in agricultural (15 percentage points) and manufacturing (27 percentage points) sectors while the corresponding male shares rose (albeit marginally). This essay argues that various structures of constraint on the supply-side such as early childbearing patterns, patriarchal rules regarding seclusion and marriage, and a larger burden of unpaid care-work under the joint-family system restrict women's participation in paid work. Similarly, on the demand-side, pervasive systematic discrimination, wherein job ads explicitly demand male candidates, discourages women's preferences for and access to paid work.

1. Introduction

Gender inequalities in labor market outcomes in Pakistan remain stubbornly high. A report by Gallup Pakistan (2021), based on analysis of the data from Pakistan Labor Force Survey 2017-18, shows that the incidence of unemployment is much higher among females than males. Among those who are above 18 years of age and have an undergraduate or above degree, 41% of the women are unemployed compared to the 6% of the unemployed men. Within the same cohort, the labor force participation rate was 48% for women and 94% for men. The report revealed that nearly 83% of the unemployed women in this cohort showed a willingness to accept employment with compromising terms and conditions, compared to the 59% of men who showed such willingness. This suggests that women in Pakistan, despite having suitable qualifications, and willingness to pursue paid work, are more likely than men to be unemployed.

A quick look at the historical data on male and female labor force participation rates shows a slow improvement in the female rate over the past three decades. According to International Labor Organization estimates, the difference between male and female labor force participation rate (for ages 15 and above) was around 70% in 1990. By 2019, this difference stood at around 60%. Pakistan Labor Force Survey reports over 1990-2018 show that the difference in male and female labor force participation rate has remained high in urban areas (1999-2000: 56.2%; 2017-18: 55.6%) while rural areas have made some improvement (1999-2000: 57%; 2017-18: 43.2%). In rural areas female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) rose from 16.1% in 1999-2000 to 25.6% in 2017-18, an increase of 59 percentage points. Comparatively, the female labor force participation rate in urban

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